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8  
9 **UNITED STATES BANKRUPTCY COURT**  
10 **CENTRAL DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA - SANTA ANA DIVISION**  
11

12 In re:

13 THE LITIGATION PRACTICE GROUP,  
14 P.C.,

15 Debtor.

Chapter 11

Case No. 8:23-bk-10571-SC

**TRUSTEE'S REPLY TO ASHLEE  
COLONNA COHEN'S *PRO SE*  
OPPOSITION TO TRUSTEE'S MOTION  
FOR TURNOVER PURSUANT TO 11  
U.S.C. § 542(e)**

**Hearing**

Date: January 31, 2024  
Time: 1:30 p.m. (Pacific Time)  
Judge: Hon. Scott C. Clarkson  
Location: Courtroom 5C  
411 West Fourth Street  
Santa Ana, CA 92701

22 On January 10, 2024, Richard M. Marshack, Chapter 11 Trustee, by and through his special  
23 counsel, caused to be filed a Motion for Turnover Pursuant to 11 U.S.C. § 542(e); Memorandum of  
24 Points and Authorities in Support of Motion for Turnover Pursuant to 11 U.S.C § 542(e); and  
25 Declaration of Richard A. Marshack in Support Thereof ("Motion") [Dkt. No. 828] and Notice of  
26 Motion ("Notice") [Dkt. No. 829]. The Motion was directed to Colonna Cohen Law, PLLC ("Firm"),  
27 a New York PLLC, and Proof of Service was filed on January 10, 2024 [Dkt. No. 830]. Pursuant to  
28 the Notice, parties were required to file any Opposition to the Motion at least 14 days before the

1 scheduled hearing date of January 31, 2024. The Notice further noted that pursuant to LBR 9013-1(h)  
2 the failure to file a timely response to the Motion may be deemed consent to the relief sought in the  
3 Motion. On the afternoon of January 24, 2024, Ms. Colonna Cohen, a licensed New York attorney,  
4 sent undersigned counsel a *pro se* opposition to the Motion on behalf of the Firm (“Opposition”). The  
5 Opposition was filed on January 26, 2024 and was entered on the Docket as No. 895 on January 29,  
6 2024. While the Motion was directed to the Firm, Ms. Colonna Cohen, as managing member of the  
7 Firm, filed the Opposition as a *pro se* pleading. It is unclear who else received this Opposition or how  
8 this Opposition was served.

9 **ADDITIONAL RELEVANT FACTS**

10 Given the arguments and assertions made in the Opposition, some additional facts must be  
11 placed into the record.

12 First, the Firm and not Ms. Colonna Cohen filed Proof of Claim No. 204 (“Claim”) on August  
13 14, 2023 in the amount of \$808,704.37. The Claim was filed as an unsecured claim seeking legal fees  
14 based on a contingent fee arrangement based on the Debtor’s “savings” in a settlement with a merchant  
15 cash advance lender. The March 1, 2022 invoice attached to the Claim is redacted, and the Trustee  
16 does not know the details of this settlement. Given that the Debtor likely borrowed the money to pay  
17 the settlement proceeds from another merchant cash advance lender, it is unclear whether there was  
18 any savings to the Estate whether the Debtor “saved” anything at all.

19 Second, because the Debtor’s engagement letter was with the Firm, the Opposition should not  
20 be considered because the Firm cannot represent itself and because Ms. Colonna Cohen does not have  
21 standing to oppose the Motion as an individual. It is black letter law that entities cannot represent  
22 themselves in court even if the individual appearing *pro se* is the president or owner of the entity. See  
23 Rowland v. Cal. Men's Colony, 506 U.S. 194, 202, 113 S. Ct. 716, 721 (1993) (collecting cases and  
24 finding that the lower courts have uniformly held that 28 U.S.C. § 1654, providing that “parties may  
25 plead and conduct their own cases personally or by counsel,” does not allow corporations,  
26 partnerships, or associations to appear in federal court otherwise than through a licensed attorney.”)

27 Third, the Firm represented the Debtor in several cases in New York state court filed by  
28 merchant cash advance lenders. Some of the Plaintiffs in these cases are current alleged secured

creditors of the Debtor while the cases of other Plaintiffs settled. This representation was lucrative for the Firm with over \$1,200,000.00 paid to the Firm between November 2021 and October 2022 based on information from the Trustee's accountant, Grobstein Teeple LLP. The Trustee has no information on the calculation of these payments, but it is possible that the estate may have significant claims against the Firm that would offset any amount that the may be owed upon the Claim. A declaration from counsel regarding these payments is attached hereto as Exhibit A.

Finally, on January 4, 2024, despite Ms. Cohen's statement to the contrary in her Opposition (pg. 8, lines 19-21) Ms. Lissebeck did respond via email to Ms. Cohen's questions, stating that Ms. Cohen was provided a copy of the administrative bar date notice, which was properly served at the address identified by the Firm on its Claim. See, Opposition, bottom of pg 18.

#### **TURNOVER IS REQUIRED AND NECESSARY**

On January 26, 2024, the Trustee filed suit against those parties that assert perfected security interests against the Debtor's assets. Many of the Defendants in this adversary are either Plaintiffs in state court litigation where the Firm represented the Debtor, or are the assignees of UCC-1 Statements from parties that reached settlements with the Debtor that were handled by the Firm. The Trustee needs the Debtor's client files that the Firm is holding to move this suit forward and to investigate additional claims against parties-in-interest.

The Trustee understands that all of the pre-petition litigation actions against LPG, including the New York Cases, were stayed. The Trustee has tried to resolve this dispute before filing the Motion and notes the Firm's stance is at odds with Rule 16(e) of the New York Rules of Professional Conduct which requires a lawyer to "take steps, to the extent practicable, to avoid foreseeable prejudice to the rights of the client ... delivering to the client all papers and property to which the client is entitled [.]". While the New York Rules of Professional Conduct acknowledge the statutory lien rights of attorneys, the Firm's demands to be paid in full or ahead of every other creditor on its Claim is prejudicing the Trustee's work. Despite the many issues with the Opposition, the Trustee asks for a ruling on the merits to expedite the delivery of the information held by the Firm.

The Trustee agrees that New York law, to the extent it is controlling, appears to grant an attorney both a "charging lien" on the claims given to them to litigate and a common law "retaining

lien” against the a client’s files and documents as a protection for nonpayment. See *In re Heinsheimer*, 214 N.Y. 361, 364, 108 N.E. 636, 637 (1915). It appears that the Firm is asserting a “retaining lien” on all matters it handled for the Debtor in order to extract the amount sought in the Claim that is owed for one concluded matter. It is not clear if this is permissible under New York law. Furthermore, the Firm fails to understand that while the files may be subject to the Firm’s state law liens, the files themselves remain property of the estate subject to the asserted liens. In this respect, this issue is no different than any other dispute between a secured creditor and debtor.

#### **REVIEW OF CLAIM AND DETERMINATION OF LIEN**

While decided under the Florida law governing attorneys’ liens, the case of *In re Matassini*, 90 B.R. 508 (Bankr. M.D. Fl. 1988) is on point. The Court noted there was no dispute that a statutory or common law lien based on possession, like the Firm’s alleged lien, was controlled by state law and was not eliminated merely because a bankruptcy was filed. But the lien on the files remained subject to 11 U.S.C. § 542(e), which Congress enacted to

to eliminate the leverage of accountants and attorneys under state lien law which often requires full payment of professional fees over the debts of other creditors prior to the professional releasing information. With the enactment of 11 U.S.C. § 542(e), the bankruptcy court may order turnover of the information when the information is necessary to the administration of the estate. H.R. 95-595, 95th Cong., 1st Sess. 369-70 (1977); S. Rep. No. 95-989, 95th Cong., 2d Sess. 84 (1978); U.S. Code Cong. & Admin. News 1978, p. 5787, 6325.

*In re Matassini*, 90 B.R. 508, 509 (Bankr. M.D. Fla. 1988).

The Court in *Matassini* noted that adequate protection should be given to the lienholder because the surrender of the files or documents would void the possessory lien under state law. The Opposition cites similar protections granted in other cases to demand that the Firm’s Claim should be paid immediately or it should be granted a “valid, superior lien in the Estate’s assets that must be paid” before any other creditor. These demands put the cart before the horse contradicting New York state law and the Bankruptcy Code.

Under New York state law, a discharged attorney asserting a lien based on a contingent fee provision has the option of taking a fixed dollar amount compensation, presently determined on a basis of *quantum meruit*, or, instead, of taking a contingent amount or percentage also based on *quantum*

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1 *meruit* but with the amount or percentage determined in an ancillary proceeding at the conclusion of  
2 the case.

3 *See Paolillo v. Am. Exp. Isbrandtsen Lines, Inc.*, 305 F. Supp. 250, 251 (S.D.N.Y. 1969).

4 The amount of the Claim cannot be fixed until this has been done. Similarly, a Trustee in  
5 bankruptcy has a fiduciary duty to review proofs of claim, object to claims lacking documentation or  
6 where recovery should be barred, and to determine the status of secured claims pursuant to 11 U.S.C.  
7 §§ 502 and 506. This Court has the exclusive jurisdiction over “allowance or disallowance of claims”  
8 and of the “determination of the validity, extent, or priority of liens.” None of this has happened yet.  
9 Furthermore, immediate payment or allowance of the Claim is impossible under 11 U.S.C. 502(d)  
10 which disallows the claim of any party “from which property is recoverable under section 542, 543,  
11 550, or 553 of this title[.]” As noted above, the Trustee is investigating potential avoidance actions  
12 against the Firm. Thus, § 502(d) bars immediate payment of the Claim.

### 13 CONCLUSION

14 Congress enacted 11 U.S.C. § 542(e) to prohibit the demands in the Opposition and the Court  
15 has the authority to oversee the turnover of the files such that all parties retain their rights and claims  
16 as of the Petition Date. The Firm’s interest in the files will be adequately protected if they are turned  
17 over to the Trustee subject to an order both reserving all the rights and claims of the Firm and the  
18 Trustee and preserving whatever rights the Firm had as of the Petition Date. The Opposition’s  
19 demands for immediate payment or immediate allowance of its Claim are prohibited by New York  
20 law and the Bankruptcy Code.

21 Dated: January 29, 2024

Respectfully submitted,

22 **DINSMORE & SHOHL LLP**

23  
24 By: /s/ Yosina M. Lissebeck

25 Christopher B. Ghio  
26 Yosina M. Lissebeck  
27 Special Counsel to Richard A. Marshack,  
28 Chapter 11 Trustee

**DECLARATION OF YOSINA M. LISSEBECK**

I, Yosina M. Lissebeck, declare as follows:

1. I am an attorney in the bankruptcy practice group at Dinsmore & Shohl LLP (“Dinsmore” or the “Firm”), special counsel to Richard A. Marshack, Chapter 11 trustee (the “Trustee”) for The Litigation Practice Group, P.C. (the “Debtor” or “LPG”) in the above-captioned bankruptcy case (the “Case”). I am one of the attorneys at Dinsmore that represent the Trustee. I have personal knowledge of the facts in this declaration and, if called as a witness, I could and would testify competently thereto. Capitalized terms not otherwise defined herein have the same meanings ascribed to them in the pleading to which this declaration is attached.

2. The Court may take judicial notice of the following:

(a) On March 20, 2023, the Debtor filed a voluntary petition for relief under Chapter 11 of Title 11 of the United States Code, 11 U.S.C. §§ 101 et seq. (the “Bankruptcy Code”), in the United States Bankruptcy Court for the Central District of California (the “Court”).

(b) On May 4, 2023, the Court entered the *Order Directing United States Trustee to Appoint a Chapter 11 Trustee* [Docket No. 58], and on May 8, 2023, the Trustee filed his *Acceptance of Appointment as Chapter 11 Trustee* [Docket No. 63]. Since his appointment, the Trustee has served in this capacity and has started his investigation of the Debtor’s pre-petition business and transactions.

(c) On July 3, 2023, the Court entered an order approving the Trustee’s retention of Grobstein Teeple LLP (“Grobstein”) as accountant for the Trustee effective as of May 12, 2023 [Docket. No. 169].

3. I reviewed the Claim filed by the Firm in this case, and I asked Grobstein to see if the Debtor previously made similar payments to the Firm prior to bankruptcy.

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1           4.       Based on the bank statements in its possession, Grobstein advised that the Debtor had  
2 paid the Firm \$1,215,614.61 from November 8, 2021 through October 19, 2022. While the first  
3 payment was \$600,000.00, no other payment exceeded \$100,000.00. Grobstein does not have a  
4 complete set of pre-petition bank statements and additional payments may be discovered.

5           I declare under penalty of perjury under the laws of the United States of America that the  
6 foregoing is true and correct.

7  
8 Dated: January 29, 2024

/s/ Yosina M. Lissebeck

Yosina M. Lissebeck

## PROOF OF SERVICE OF DOCUMENT

I am over the age of 18 and not a party to this bankruptcy case or adversary proceeding. My business address is:  
655 W. Broadway, Suite 800, San Diego, California 92101

A true and correct copy of the foregoing document entitled: **TRUSTEE'S REPLY TO ASHLEE COLONNA COHEN'S PRO SE OPPOSITION TO TRUSTEE'S MOTION FOR TURNOVER PURSUANT TO 11 U.S.C. § 542(e)**

will be served or was served (a) on the judge in chambers in the form and manner required by LBR 5005-2(d); and (b) in the manner stated below:

1. **TO BE SERVED BY THE COURT VIA NOTICE OF ELECTRONIC FILING (NEF)**: Pursuant to controlling General Orders and LBR, the foregoing document will be served by the court via NEF and hyperlink to the document. On January 29, 2024, I checked the CM/ECF docket for this bankruptcy case or adversary proceeding and determined that the following persons are on the Electronic Mail Notice List to receive NEF transmission at the email addresses stated below:

☒ Service information continued on attached page

2. **SERVED BY UNITED STATES MAIL**: On January 29, 2024, I served the following persons and/or entities at the last known addresses in this bankruptcy case or adversary proceeding by placing a true and correct copy thereof in a sealed envelope in the United States mail, first class, postage prepaid, and addressed as follows. Listing the judge here constitutes a declaration that mailing to the judge will be completed no later than 24 hours after the document is filed.

☐ Service information continued on attached page

3. **SERVED BY PERSONAL DELIVERY, OVERNIGHT MAIL, FACSIMILE TRANSMISSION OR EMAIL** (state method for each person or entity served): Pursuant to F.R.Civ.P. 5 and/or controlling LBR, on January 29, 2024, I served the following persons and/or entities by personal delivery, overnight mail service, or (for those who consented in writing to such service method), by facsimile transmission and/or email as follows. Listing the judge here constitutes a declaration that personal delivery on, or overnight mail to, the judge will be completed no later than 24 hours after the document is filed.

**JUDGE'S COPY - HAND DELIVERY**

The Honorable Scott C. Clarkson  
United States Bankruptcy Court  
Central District of California  
Ronald Reagan Federal Building and Courthouse  
411 West Fourth Street, Suite 5130 / Courtroom 5C  
Santa Ana, CA 92701-4593

**VIA EMAIL**: Ashlee Colonna Cohen - [ashlee@colonnacohenlaw.com](mailto:ashlee@colonnacohenlaw.com)

☐ Service information continued on attached page

I declare under penalty of perjury under the laws of the United States that the foregoing is true and correct.

January 29, 2024

Date

Caron Burke

Printed Name

/s/ Caron Burke

Signature



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